

I. Background on American Diploma Project

Project Goals

Achieve, Inc., The Education Trust, The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and The National Alliance of Business (NAB) joined forces in 2001 to establish The American Diploma Project (ADP). The overarching goal of the ADP is to ensure that the awarding of a high school diploma means that students possess the knowledge and skills they need to:

1. begin credit-bearing coursework at a state postsecondary institution;
2. begin an entry-level job in a high-performance workplace; or
3. receive a professional placement in the armed services.

The nature of learning and work in the twenty-first century economy has created a situation in which high school graduates—no matter which of these paths they choose—will need levels of literacy and numeracy that far exceed those demanded of their parents. As its starting point, ADP chose to focus on the critical areas of English language arts and mathematics.

The two-year project, funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, has divided its work into two phases. The first year (2002) was devoted to research. ADP staff has worked with its five partner states to define preliminary twenty-first century postsecondary and workplace expectations in English language arts and mathematics, and compared those expectations to current ADP state high school exit standards and assessments. This year, informed by work in the partner states, ADP is refining its new set of benchmarks in English language arts and mathematics so that *every* state can use them to assess the efficacy of its high school graduation standards and assessments.

Recruitment of Partner States and Partner State Commitments

Five states, selected from among fifteen states that applied, are partners in The American Diploma Project. In order to be invited to participate in the project, the governors, chief state school officers, postsecondary and business leaders from **Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nevada and Texas** committed to develop plans for meeting the following ADP policy goals:

- ❑ considering standards-based achievement in reading, writing and mathematics as the essential core of partner states' high school diplomas
- ❑ considering standards-based high school assessment data as one criterion in postsecondary admissions and/or placement processes
- ❑ considering standards-based high school assessment data as one criterion in employer hiring processes

Each ADP state's policy panel will determine how and when the state will reach these goals.

Year One: Research

ADP project staff worked with staff from the four partner organizations, Educational Testing Service, partner-state postsecondary faculty and partner state employers to:

- **define workplace expectations** for high-growth, high-performance occupations;
- **define postsecondary expectations** in English language arts and mathematics (i.e., the knowledge and skills needed in order to begin credit-bearing coursework in state postsecondary institutions); and
- **determine the alignment** between current ADP state high school exit standards and assessments and the expectations as defined by employers and postsecondary faculty.

The results of this research were presented to the Kentucky P – 16 Council in December, 2002. The ADP states' policy panels are considering the findings as they develop their workplans for closing the gaps between K – 12 and postsecondary expectations and for using standards-based assessment data in high school exit, postsecondary admissions/placement and employer hiring policies.

Year Two: Final State Workplans and New Benchmarks

Based on the research conducted in year one, ADP staff has prepared a draft of its new English language arts and mathematics benchmarks; these benchmarks represent a synthesis of the expectations defined by both postsecondary faculty in the five partner states and by employers nationally.

ADP staff is working with state policy panel members and other state ADP team members this year to:

- circulate the draft ADP benchmarks for further comments;
- gather sample workplace tasks and postsecondary assignments to illustrate the benchmarks; and
- finalize ADP state workplans.

ADP staff will also convene “content expert” panels to review and refine the new benchmarks, incorporating feedback from employers and postsecondary faculty, as well as sample tasks and assignments. These panels will also include employers and postsecondary faculty. The panels will present the new benchmarks to the ADP's national advisory panel in June, after which the benchmarks will undergo another round of circulation nationally.

In November, when the national advisory panel meets for the second time to finalize the new benchmarks, ADP partner states will present their workplans, offering advice to other states who may wish to use the benchmarks to analyze the efficacy of their current high school exit standards and assessments and/or who wish to consider making the kinds of groundbreaking policy changes that our five original partner states will have made, or will be committed to making.